A synopsis submitted in the partial fulfilment of the submission of the thesis titled "Muslim Childhoods amidst Discourses on Nationalism in India: A Critical Social Psychological Approach"

To

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THESIS SYNOPSIS

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This thesis presents a critical, socio-psychological analysis of Muslim childhoods in India, a minimally researched area. It examines how the tension between the competing discourses of nationalism, within a larger socio-political context of 'othering', becomes apparent in the lives of children belonging to the Muslim community, a marginalised religious minority group. From the existing literature, it was clear that despite being the most urbanised religious community, the socio-economic conditions of Muslims continue to be poorer than other minorities living in India. Problems of poverty, unemployment, poor access to education, healthcare, housing and being subject to various forms of violence including riots and genocides have been explained by pointing to certain unique aspects of marginalisation, which have not been found among other minorities (Basant, 2012; Gayer & Jaffrelot, 2012; Mander, 2019; Robinson, 2005, 2012). A nationwide study reported that Muslims have been looked at with suspicion in public spaces due to a double burden of being labelled as 'anti-national' and as being 'appeased', they experience hostility and discrimination while trying to access housing, in schools and jobs, they have been perceived as not interested in education, and they also fear being attacked during times of communal tension in any part of the country (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2006). Alongside have been popular discourses that make an association of violence with Islam— madrasahs labelled as 'dens of terror', Muslim men stereotyped as aggressive/violent whereas Muslim women as suppressed/disadvantaged, and Mughal rulers marked as Muslim, and portrayed negatively in textbooks.

Within the synthesis of the extant literature, as these various threads were schematically mapped, it became clear that the religious identity of Muslims has become salient due to India's colonial past which culminated in the Partition. Thus, nationalist discourses, religion being an important facet in their articulations, have always had an enduring effect on the Muslims. The two major strands of nationalism— Indian nationalism (termed secularism post-independence) aims at 'inclusion' of religious minorities and Hindu nationalism/Hindutva explicitly excludes them, especially the Muslims from their imaginations of a 'Hindu' India. In the imagination of the latter, Muslims were cast as 'outsiders' or 'invaders'. In sum, an overarching theme that ties these aspects of lived marginalisation and popular, dominant discourses is the construction of the Muslim as 'the other'—to be included or excluded— within the discourses of nationalism. Therefore, any question posed to understand Indian Muslim childhoods would be essentially linked to

questions of how nationalism is (re)produced in the lives of children since all other discourses/stereotypes stem from it or overlap with it.

Thus, this thesis sets out to ask— what kind of socio-political discourses about the community are Muslim children aware of? What are their experiences? More specifically, how do they make sense of the nationalism discourses that often cast them as 'the other'? What are their cognitive, behavioural, and emotional responses? The study traces the interplay between the personal and the political— and demonstrates how the entanglement between religious and national identity within these discourses influence children's learning about the self and the other, their social goals and their overall identity processes.

Muslim childhood finds its mention in very few studies in India though research studies emphasise that early childhoods in India are often marked by religion. Within the context of schooling, though state schools in India tend to promote values of tolerance towards all religions, 'unity in diversity', they have concomitantly shown to be important sites of teaching a Hinduised idea of being Indian through rituals like pooja (Nambissan, 2010), touching the teachers feet, having pictures of deities, exclusive celebrations of Hindu festivals (Gogoi, 2014; Srivastava, 1998), linking of religious and national identity by repetitive singing of religious songs, embodiments and symbols (Bénéï, 2008; Thapan, 2014), disciplining of the body and mind through Hindu moral values (Deka, 2014) and textbook histories (Thapar, 2014). Barring a few exceptions, studies have shown that in the minds of Hindu children, 'true Indianness' was being equated to being Hindu and Muslims were considered to be 'an undifferentiated mass of people who cannot be trusted or who can turn violent any time' making Muslims a single entity analogous of disgust, threat thereby worthy of being hated and 'othered'. Thus, there is need to recognise the impact of communalism in the context of education. Indian schools have shown to thus (re)produce nationalism discourses that entail exclusion of religious minorities. Apart from schools, such dominant discourses and stereotypes (of terrorism, also beef-eating and veiling of women) about Muslims propagated through media, movies and textbooks, and impact childhoods (Nathan, 2019). This has important implications for children, as they use these representations as a means to make sense of the world and build their own identities. For children belonging to minorities, the sense of belonging to the nation can be emotionally straining due to the negativity attached to their minority status (Scourfield et al., 2006). Thus, this thesis sets out to explore this interlacing of minority childhoods and nationalism.

To do this, the study makes a unique contribution by taking an interdisciplinary, critical social psychological (CSP) framework and attempts to bridge the disciplinary tensions and fissures between psychology, sociology and childhood studies,. This framework allows enough room for a researcher to navigate between the personal and social without having to take an either-or path. It critiques universalization/normalization of all human experience, recognizes the embeddedness of individuals in their sociohistorical, cultural and political contexts imbued with contradictions of power, at the same time conceives human beings as active agents and treats researcher reflexivity as a productive force (Braun et al., 2017; Dreier, 2020; Holzkamp, 1983; Parker, 2007). Childhood studies often blends with other disciplines and has over the years continued to further our understandings of the key concepts related to children— critique of developmental perspectives, social (re)construction of childhood, child rights, agency, children as beings v/s becomings, citizenship and more (James & James, 2004; Qvortrup et al., 2009). Overall childhood studies denies the existence of a singular, essentialised notion of childhood by conceiving childhoods as complex, socially constructed phenomena that are (re)invented within diverse societies, while emphasizing children as social actors with agency. Since CSP approaches have similar underpinnings, they marry well with childhood studies to form a sound theoretical framework to fulfil the objectives of this study.

This study becomes relevant in a time when the world is witnessing an unapologetic normalisation of several isms (like nationalism, racism, fascism, sexism), xenophobia and islamophobia through right-wing political discourses and populism (Psaltis et al., 2017; Wodak, 2021). India is one such example wherein the right-wing ruling party's Hindutva movement has come to an unprecedented great strength. As children become exposed to such potent discourses of nationalism, questions of exclusion become more pertinent since social institutions like the family, school and media form important sites that continually regulate and (re)produce "childhood as part of national projects" (Millei & Imre, 2016, p.11). Among these institutions, schools have been considered central not only because children spend a large chunk of their day at schools but also because the state uses schools to consciously cultivate ideas of nationalism in children through their actual and hidden curriculum (Ahonen, 2001; Bénéï, 2008; Benwell, 2014; Carretero et al., 2012; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Liu & Hilton, 2005). Thus, schools were chosen as the primary site of investigation.

The fieldwork was carried out in two phases; first visiting and understanding the types of educational spaces available to Muslim students in Bangalore. The second phase involved making a systematic classification of these spaces and narrowing down the specific sites for ethnographic fieldwork. To cater to the heterogeneity within the Indian Muslim community, a multi-sited ethnography was carried out, focused on children in the age range of 12-16 years. However, along with schools, as critical educators have now increasingly emphasized extra-educational contexts in the complex and dynamic process of identity building (Spyrou, 2002), children's social interactions outside the schools— family, neighbourhood and social media — have been included as points of enquiry. Within ethnography, the methods of data collection used were— participant observation, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The data was coded, analysed using a blended approach (Graebner et al., 2012) which began with inductive coding and then moved towards deductive coding using a critical psychological conceptual lenses. Looking for themes and moving towards abstraction was done keeping in mind that themes were identified by bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which are often meaningless when viewed alone (Aronson, 1995). These themes were further refined through a reiterative process of collapsing/merging/separation until final abstract analytical themes emerged.

The findings highlight children's identity negotiations (keeping in mind their multiple intersecting identities), their agency and their cognitive, behavioural and emotional responses to dominant discourses. Through an in-depth analysis, the study shows that children engage with the political as ideas of nationalism are (re)produced in their everyday lives through a number of routine activities, in their schools (and other social spaces) which have often been perceived to be neutral spaces. Whether children identify with religion or not, they have no escape from their religious identity becoming salient— the probability that a given identity will be invoked in a social interaction. These interactions in turn bring about an important realisation, in the minds of children, of the 'self' being constructed as 'the other'. Children recognise that this construction is not a simple religious marginalisation rather it is due an intersection of their religious and national identities, which becomes evident through everyday nationalism and through episodes of hot nationalism (anti-Muslim violence, the CAA, the Babri-Ayodhya dispute and the passing of the Triple Talaq Bill).

Chapter 3 deals with the question of how Muslim children learn about dominant discourses of nationalism and other socio-political discourses that revolve around the

community. This chapter particularly draws from Billig's (1995) 'everyday nationalism' to explain how children constantly (re)negotiate these discourses that percolate the spaces of their everyday lives. As children encounter stereotypes that make their religious identities salient, the analysis demonstrates how they become political actors. A range of their responses in different contexts with different social actors are discussed and inferences are drawn on their identity processes. This analysis is extended in Chapter 4, wherein children's responses during periods are discussed when the sense of belongingness to the nation becomes explicit. Using three cases in point of 'hot nationalism' (Billig, 1995; Fox, 2017) that had brought forth the Muslim identity, the contradictory, ambivalent and shifting nature of children's social positions and their ability to critically examine such issues are detailed, and thus childhood has been pointed out as an ambivalent social phenomenon. It becomes clear in Chapter 3 and 4 that the past continues to bear weight on the present. In other words, the dominant socio-political discourses, deeply rooted in historical constructions of the Muslim identity, are shown to be continually (re)evoked in the lives of children. Therefore, in Chapter 5, the discussion on children's identity processes is deepened by focusing on their consumption of history. This chapter is insightful in providing an understanding of how children appropriate and resolve discrepancies between official narratives that exclude minorities and unofficial community narratives that foster a sense of belongingness to the nation. Through these findings, the outcomes of in/congruence among children's intersecting identities are reflected upon. Finally, in Chapter 6, Muslim children's experiences and agency, which are in a constant dialogue with parental decisions, are shown to be important aspects of the process of choosing a school. Here the manner in which the manifestation of nationalism discourses results in marginalisation has been demonstrated. Differential levels of discrimination/exclusions at a structural/geographic level (lack of Urdu medium high schools, precarious conditions of religiously segregated homes) and at a micro, everyday level (being asked to take part in Hindu religious rituals, not being allowed to wear hijabs, being force fed during Ramadan fasts) within schools result in narrow school choice set. Children are bound to travel long distances, accept a sudden change in the medium of instruction or often switch between schools in order to complete their education.

Through these findings, it becomes clear that is there is an urgent need for Indian schools to recognise that they are key sites for building children's national identities and recalibrate to what extent their actual and hidden curriculum are in opposition or in keeping

with the constitutional commitment of a secular national identity that treats all religions as equal. More importantly, exclusion attempts to render, among minority children, a belief that their personal values are inferior, deficient, or substandard. This is compounded by the dominant discourses outside the school. The implications of such a devaluation or disconnect on identity has been illustrated throughout. And thus, there is a need to device mechanisms that would make schools consolidate plurality of other identities (caste, religion, gender, and class) within the same national identity and thereby inculcating a fruitful integration among children from diverse backgrounds. This could further help children challenge nationalism discourses that are exclusionary. Additionally, schools must become spaces that encourage critical inquiry, and allow students to voice their concerns or confusions and bring up matters of difference without fear.